

The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050 by Joel Kotkin

Reviewed by Ira Sohn

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Changes in population affect everything. Whether the topic is long-term assessments of energy consumption and its by-products, such as greenhouse gases, or government-administered entitlement programs, like the U.S. Social Security and Medicare systems, or the not-so-simple basics of healthy food and clean water, a nation's population – big, small, growing, shrinking, moving or staying put – has to be part of the discussion. Fluctuations in fertility rates, mortality and morbidity rates, retirement ages, and, not least, immigration and emigration policies are driving forces behind projections of many important ingredients that determine our standard of living.

For the forecaster, population dynamics are easier to incorporate into long-term prediction models than are some other critical components, such as technological changes and the nature and timing of scientific, engineering, and regulatory changes, like increased energy-efficiency standards and more stringent controls on the emission of greenhouse gases. Regulations are mandated and enforced through the public-policy process, which is influenced by the pendulum swing of national electoral cycles and global political initiatives.

Those of us who observe, study, and analyze social and economic trends have been richly rewarded with a bounty of recent publications on the dynamics of national and global

rates of population growth and decline. Two examples are “A Slow-Burning Fuse,” a special report on aging populations that appeared in *The Economist* (2009), and the book *The Age of Aging* (2009) by George Magnus, the respected London-based chief economist of UBS. Both provide a much-needed overview of the great population transitions ongoing in the world today and the challenges these changing demographic profiles pose to politicians and policy makers. They point out the limits to policy options for exploiting the upside of “favorable” future demographic profiles and present feasible menus of political, social, and economic policy choices that can mitigate the downside of “unfavorable” demographics.

You may add to this list Joel Kotkin's *The Next Hundred Million: America in 2050*. Kotkin, a leading expert on urban and regional issues, makes his book's point of departure the prospective demographic profile of the United States over the next four decades, focusing on the likely changes in American living patterns through 2050 with an emphasis on geographical trends, rather than the changing urban-suburban-rural population distribution.

Kotkin believes that the addition of another 83 million people to the U.S. population in the next 40 years will result in a large shift

away from the renowned megalopolitan centers of the East and West coasts to continued in-migration to the Sunbelt cities of Atlanta, Dallas, Houston, and Phoenix, and their surrounding areas. More importantly, he thinks that many of the smaller cities of the heartland and mountain regions – Boise, Charlotte, Fargo, Sioux Falls, Tucson – are becoming increasingly desirable destinations as the nation's population tracks to reach 400 million by 2050, mainly because of continuing technological advances in transport and telecommunications.



America's demographic vitality has been marked by birth rates that are much higher than those in most other developed (and aging) European and Asian countries, as well as by a continuing flow of legal (and illegal) immigrants. The U.S. population of 100 million people in 1915 doubled by 1966, reached 300 million in 2006, and is projected to grow to 400 million by mid-century. The fears of neo-Malthusians should be allayed, however, by a more careful examination of these numbers. The annualized growth rates of the U.S. population over these three intervals are 1.37% (1915-66), 1.02% (1966-2006), and a projected 0.66% (2006-50): that is, a monotonically declining rate of growth over each successive long-term interval that cumulatively extends over 135 years.

While modest long-term population growth does not insure economic vitality, it does appear to be a necessary condition for higher future living standards. Despite Russia's immense wealth of natural resources, Kotkin points out that, because of the projected 30% decline in its population by 2050, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has cited these demographic trends as a "serious threat of turning [Russia] into a decaying nation." This population decline is unprecedented in the annals of demography; in the past, nations experiencing such a drop in numbers of their citizenry were suffering extreme political or economic stress or the effects of a health pandemic. None of these factors are in play here, and the mystery surrounding Russia's population dynamics must be as challenging for demographers as it is for marine biologists to unravel the reasons why seemingly healthy whales suicidally beach themselves.

As we settle into the second decade of the 21st century, the evidence is irrefutable that the "world economy is moving east," whether gauged by resource use, manufacturing activity, financial services, household consumption, or – last, but not least – greenhouse-gas emissions. Nevertheless, Kotkin is "long" on the U.S. over the next four decades, mainly because of another fortuitous – and complementary – ingredient to America's relatively favorable demographics to mid-century: the enormous amounts of space that, if properly developed, can easily accommodate the next 100 million Americans.

To be sure, these low-population-density rates are not in the traditional "luxury cities" of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, or Boston, but in the interior Sunbelt and the heartland and mountain regions mentioned previously. Of course, the attraction of this latter group of cities is due to their relatively low property prices that enable middle-income families to enjoy much higher living standards than what they could have reached if they had lived in densely populated and high-property-value cities or their suburbs. This reasoning would support the impression

that apartment dwellers of Manhattan (New York, not Kansas!) have long had: New Yorkers are people with mostly middle-class incomes who pay upper-class rents to live in lower-class housing.

The progressive migration to the heartland cities and surroundings is being facilitated by the ongoing technological advances in transport and telecommunications that continue to mitigate the effects of distance as an obstacle to moving goods, services, and people. Barring a breakthrough in the commercialization of alternatively fueled vehicles -- and given the book's 40-year time frame, this is not entirely unlikely -- rising gasoline prices will surely encourage less travel to and from work, whether by road or air.

While Kotkin has unqualified praise for America's unique degree of decentralization, I would raise flashing yellow lights to signal "proceed, albeit with caution." Despite nationwide product-safety codes, public health standards, and banking regulations, the country is failing a large portion of its schoolchildren by delaying the introduction of comprehensive educational reforms that would result in unifying its school system to make certain that the overwhelming majority of new entrants to the labor force are equipped with the educational skills needed to live productive and meaningful lives.

In a country that is one with respect to transport, telecoms, and information

infrastructure, maintaining local (or even state-level) control over educational standards is a policy, in my opinion, whose time has passed. Despite all the advantages America has as a nation, the growth in our living standards will surely be stunted unless we abandon the concept that mathematics and English grammar can be different in Maine than they are in California and move to a national standard.

REFERENCES

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